

The SWAPO Congress

BY LAUREN DOBELL

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From December 6 to 11, 1991, SWAPO held its first National Congress as independent Namibia's first ruling party. The SWAPO Congress was the first to be held on Namibian soil in thirty years, and in many respects was the first genuine congress in the movement's history.

The Congress was billed by the organizing committee as marking the "transformation from liberation movement to mass political party," and the launching of the second phase of the struggle – the struggle for economic liberation. The media predicted clashes and power struggles between "hardliners" and "moderates" in the SWAPO government, between government and party hierarchies, and between leaders of the erstwhile "internal" and "exile" wings of the movement. The 1,000 delegates, elected from 13 regions, came hoping for solutions to immediate "bread and butter" concerns, while Moses Garoeb, party chief and Congress coordinator, promised that "the good, the bad, and the ugly" in SWAPO's history would be revealed during the course of the Congress. If, not surprisingly, none of these expectations was fully realised, the Congress nevertheless marked a watershed in the history of the movement which led Namibia to liberation, and will preside over its first years as an independent nation. What follows are a few observations – mostly impressionistic – about the Congress and what it means. Perhaps most importantly, the Congress ushered in

a new era for SWAPO – an era in which, one hopes, a more assertive "rank and file" membership will have an increasingly influential role in determining party structures, and in shaping party policy.

The opening ceremonies, moved indoors at the last moment owing to torrential rain, were attended by the entire diplomatic community – old friends and new – but the event belonged to the old friends. While the President, Prime Minister, SWAPO Secretary-General, and SWAPO Chief-Coordinator sat resplendent in outfits of blue, green and red in front of a giant banner which read "FIRST SWAPO CONGRESS IN INDEPENDENT NAMIBIA: FROM NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT TO POLITICAL PARTY. SOLIDARITY, FREEDOM AND JUSTICE" (with the word "MASS" squeezed in as an afterthought before "POLITICAL PARTY"), tributes were made to North Korea, China, Cuba, and the Frontline States, whose delegates responded with messages of solidarity – often shouting to be heard over the rain pounding on the tin roof – in what the Namibian described as a "revolutionary aura."

The most enthusiastic applause, however, was reserved for a fragile looking Oliver Tambo, who, as keynote speaker expressed

boundless joy and a sense of deep satisfaction because ... Namibia is our home and the people of this beautiful country are our own blood. Our history, our struggle, our destiny, and yours are fused

But if the new friends were not much in evidence during the opening ceremonies, the Congress could not have taken place without them. How far SWAPO's image has changed since its days as a "communist terrorist organization" was perhaps most eloquently expressed in the list of those who donated funds

for the occasion – which included the names of a number of large corporate sponsors.

The content of the Congress is perhaps best summarized in three parts – substantial, procedural, and sociological. With respect to substance, we'll take first things first: the party will retain the name SWAPO. The proposal to change SWAPO to NAPO (the Namibian People's Organization) was, not surprisingly, a non-starter. As a Youth League submission observed

the name SWAPO must not change because it is our identity and our pride. The people of Namibia suffered in the name of SWAPO and it was SWAPO which brought freedom in this country.

The Congress did decide, however, that the full name – the South West African People's Organization – is archaic and irrelevant, and that henceforth the Party will be known by acronym only, as in "SWAPO of Namibia." The Congress agreed, furthermore, to adopt Foreign Minister Theo-Ben Gurirab's suggestion that the five letters in SWAPO connote Sacrifice, Work, Advancement, Peace and Opportunities, with the single amendment that Solidarity replace Sacrifice.

The sixty-page Report of the Central Committee, covering the events of three decades of struggle, and read by the President, contained no surprises. Rather than "the good, the bad and the ugly" promised by Comrade Garoeb, it dutifully summarized what one expects will soon be entrenched as the official history of SWAPO. Once again old friends are saluted. The Frontline States, the OAU, Cuba, the USSR, the former GDR and other former East European socialist states are thanked for providing "all-round disinterested support in our cause during the dark days of

struggle," while, of the Western hemisphere, the Nordic countries, Italy and Holland are singled out for their "invaluable solidarity support and humanitarian assistance."

The report reiterates SWAPO's explanation of the tragedy of 1 April 1989, (the border crossing by SWAPO militants and their subsequent massacre by the South Africans) and condemns the dirty tricks devised by the opposition during the election campaign and the "crude propaganda" of opposition parties, especially with respect to the detainees issue, which together deprived SWAPO of a deserved two-thirds majority. The report also notes that a master list of 11,000 Namibians who died in the struggle, including the names of former detainees, had been compiled by the Department of Defense, and would soon be made available to SWAPO branch offices and Namibian churches.

If the stance and rhetoric of the "Report of the Central Committee" reflect the exigencies of fighting a liberation war with ostensibly revolutionary objectives, both the new Political Programme and Party Constitution are forward-looking documents, reflecting the priorities of a governing party elected on a platform perhaps best characterized as social-democratic. The first half of the Political Programme comprises an overview of the struggle, for the benefit of the young, in which there is no mention of socialism. In the second half, the four central present and future tasks of the party are outlined: a) the institutionalization of democratic political processes in Namibian society through the political education of the people; b) defining the role of the state in the country's socio-economic development ("despite the broad consensus in the country to allow the private sector to play an important and unimpeded role in the economy, the people still expect the state to play a role ... especially with respect to the building of schools, hos-

pital and roads, the provision of employment and establishing credit for Namibian entrepreneurs and developing favourable market conditions for them abroad"); c) achieving social justice through progressive policies designed to bring about equality of opportunity and a balanced and fair allocation of resources; and d) the building and welding together of a nation by uniting the country around a common consensus of values, goals and objectives through mass-based organization. The document concludes as follows:

The SWAPO political programme spells out the line for the Party to follow in order to play a leading role toward the building of a society that is materially and spiritually strong and productive, and whose people are secure from the anxiety of basic socio-economic needs. The implementation of the Programme will ensure that SWAPO fulfils its present and future tasks as a vital agent of development and a guarantor of democracy in our country.

The Constitution is primarily a procedural document. SWAPO's objectives have been changed to "reflect independence and SWAPO's party status in a multi-party democracy," and are "founded on the principles of democracy, solidarity, freedom, social justice and progress." The party "exists to arouse and mobilize Namibians for meaningful political participation and to translate their desires into policy," and the goal of political activity is to "improve the quality of life of the people, especially the colonially disadvantaged majority." Otherwise there are few changes to the constitution. There have been some amendments to the section on national organs, which now stipulates that affiliate organizations will no longer be named (this in light of the Namibian National Student Organization's (NANSO's) recent disaffiliation from SWAPO). The Central Committee has been increased from fifty to seventy persons, and the politburo to twenty-

one. The duties of Chairperson and Vice-President have been combined in the person of the Vice-President, while the duties of Administrator-General and Secretary-General have been combined in the person of Secretary-General. SWAPO's emblem remains a young man with a raised fist; the party motto is Solidarity, Freedom, Justice, and the anthem remains "Alert Namibia," sung to the tune of "Nkosi Sikelela," but has been converted from the present and future tenses to the past tense.

Following the adoption of the Political Programme and Constitution, the Congress heard from twelve sub-committees appointed to offer recommendations regarding: education and culture, defense and security, land, the national economy, health and social services, local government, housing, labour relations, transport and communication, legal and judicial affairs, youth and sport, and the mass media. Many of the reports were accompanied by reports produced by the relevant ministries, and each was followed by a general - and often animated - discussion.

The delegates' main concerns were clearly apparent from the time devoted to each of the reports. More esoteric subjects such as foreign relations, transport, and information policy were dealt with relatively quickly. The topics of education, national defense, crime, and the judicial system, by contrast, were each subjected to intense - and extensive - discussion. The debate on education alone lasted nine hours, and the debate on defense and security even longer, with participants advocating a tough line on both. Delegates condemned corruption in the school system, alcohol abuse by teachers and students, the sexual abuse of students by teachers, and absenteeism by both. A full-scale "war on crime" was called for, and substantial increases in both the National Defense Force and police were recommended.

Delegates' many concerns regarding the overburdened legal sys-

tem focused on four issues - inefficiency in the courts, a perceived leniency with respect to serious crimes, the relationship between customary law and common law, and the need for affirmative action in the judicial system.

The government's policy of national reconciliation also came under fire from delegates, who perceived it as being deliberately misconstrued by whites as protecting an unjust status quo. Reconciliation could not work - was too high a price to pay for stability - if it continued to be seen to benefit the "haves" at the expense of the "have nots," they noted.

The resolutions emanating from

the discussions in each of the twelve areas were summarized in the closing remarks, again delivered by the President, who observed that the Congress had been a "practical demonstration of democracy in action," which

builds on the firm foundations of a political culture which we want to nurture, develop and consolidate in our society. The seeds of this political culture were sown during the work of the historic Constituent Assembly which produced the much acclaimed model, democratic constitution of the independent Republic of Namibia. We continued with that same tradition during the Land Re-

form Conference, and this Congress (is) yet another milestone in the consolidation of that democratic culture.

(SAR readers will note with interest, as I did, President Nujoma's dating of the emergence of a democratic culture in Namibia from the convening of the Constituent Assembly in 1989).

In his closing remarks the President briefly summarized the debates on economic and foreign policy in a way which perhaps reflects more the perceptions of the party leadership than those of the rank in file, but reveals much about SWAPO's new development philosophy:



Congress identified pragmatic economic management, a viable democracy, the policy of national reconciliation, the creation of a competitively attractive and domestic investment environment, a rationalized, professional and efficient public service, and a good infrastructure, as essential ingredients for harnessing the potential wealth offered by our natural resources, especially mineral and marine resources. But above all else, maintenance of peace and security is uppermost and to this end the Party and Government remain absolutely committed.

And with respect to external relations:

The policies of SWAPO in this regard have always been aimed at securing friends who sympathize with and support our objectives of democracy and social justice ... The central approach in SWAPO's foreign policy in post-independent Namibia is to promote economic democracy. This means attracting investment, diversifying trade opportunities and promoting joint-ventures both with foreign governments and companies as well as with the local private sector.

The speech concludes with SWAPO's new call to arms: SWAPO - United! SWAPO - Victorious! Now - Hard work!

As the first of its kind inside Namibia, it is not surprising that the Congress was plagued by procedural glitches. For the most part both organizers and delegates accepted these with the good humour and patience characteristic of Namibians. After several consecutive twenty-hour days, however, delegates began to question some of the more glaring problems with the organization of the Congress. Their concerns stemmed primarily from the lack of consultation of the rank and file in the preparation of the Congress agenda and documents (these were only presented to delegates upon their arrival), and a perceived lack of democratic procedure at times in the

proceedings. Both flaws were perhaps most apparent when it came time to hold elections for the new SWAPO Central Committee.

In the first place, the election procedures were not only unwieldy but exclusionary - making it very difficult for all but the incumbents to fulfil the necessary conditions. In the first popular revolt of the Congress the delegates insisted that the provisions be re-drafted, and then again, before they finally allowed them to pass. Even so, the final version was confusing, and clearly weighted in favour of former Central Committee members. In the end, the newly-expanded Central Committee was remarkable mostly for its striking resemblance to the old. As expected, Sam Nujoma was once again acclaimed to the position of Party President. Hendrik Witbooi was re-elected Vice-President, and Moses Garoeb defeated Andimba Toivo ya Toivo for the revamped post of Secretary-General. Three seats are reserved, *ex officio* for the elected heads of the SWAPO Elders' Council, the SWAPO Women's Council and the SWAPO Youth League, and an additional six for presidential appointments. Of the remaining 58 positions - elected by Congress delegates from a list of 100 names by secret ballot - only 11 (by my count) were not current members of Cabinet, former Central Committee members, or both. There are seven women in total (three of them members of Cabinet). A few of the old guard were snubbed, and a little new blood injected. But if the Central Committee remains, on the surface, largely unchanged, the Party Congress will never be the same.

From a sociological perspective, the most fascinating aspect of the Congress was the growing assertiveness of the rank and file delegates. At the beginning of the Congress, one of the delegates - himself South African born and raised - privately expressed his frustration at the seemingly quiescent na-

ture of Namibian political culture. South Africans, he said, would never permit a proposed agenda to pass without debate, would never allow background documents to be distributed at the last minute, would never demonstrate such reluctance to challenge, question or criticise their leaders. Initially the delegates did appear to be surprisingly uncritical - but as the Congress progressed, a dramatic transformation began to take place. The shyness was shed, and participants - the women in particular - became more outspoken about the issues that directly affected their lives. Time limits to debates on such issues as education were ignored. Proposed election procedures were rejected not once, but twice, and the Election Committee sent back to re-draft them. The delegates' newly-discovered voices meant that discussion often went on long into the night, and that the Congress itself went almost two days overtime - but in the end the exhausted delegates seemed satisfied. An observation by one of the younger, more radical members of the leadership (quietly delighted at the change that had taken place), sticks in my mind:

The Congress was an important de-mythologizing experience. It wasn't always democratic - not so much intentionally, it's just what the leadership is used to - but that won't happen again. The delegates could see what was happening. They're inexperienced, but they're not stupid. Next time they will decide more things for themselves.

On the last day of the Congress I was sitting on the stoop of the International Hall with a number of weary delegates, all women, while the necessary but tedious process of translating the President's closing remarks into three other languages droned on in the background. One woman finally spoke. "They got away with some things this time maybe, but next time it's going to be different." She paused, then smiled. "Maybe I will run for President."